

**Interview with Nicholas Benton**  
**conducted by Sue Kovack Shuman for the**  
**Providence District History Project Providence Perspective**

**Sue:** We're speaking today with Nick Benton who is the founder, owner and editor of the Falls Church News Press. And this is for the Providence Perspective, Providence District history project. And I am Sue Shuman and it is July 16<sup>th</sup> 2010. Thanks for being here.

**Nick:** Very good.

**Sue:** Putting the shoe on the other foot; you're usually asking people questions.

**Nick:** That's right.

**Sue:** And writing about them so I know this will be a little strange.

**Nick:** Most of the time I'll be asking you why did you ask that question.

**Sue:** Okay, very good. I don't know many people that have a Wikipedia entry so I read your Wikipedia.

**Nick:** Ah, I've got issues with it; I mean oh yeah we've been battling with them all the time about content.

**Sue:** Oh, okay.

**Nick:** But that is an ongoing thing with Wikipedia you know.

**Sue:** Well then if I site anything from my information you tell me what is wrong.

**Nick:** Okay.

**Sue:** Um, as editor of one of the few really community papers that we have in this Washington area I wanted you to talk a little bit about that role. Now you didn't grow up in Washington correct?

**Nick:** No, I'm from California.

**Sue:** Okay. You were with the Berkley newspaper at one point.

**Nick:** That's correct.

**Sue:** The Berkley Barb?

**Nick:** Well yes after I finished my graduate Theological Seminary I in the period of the whole ferment of the civil rights antiwar ferment of the late sixties and early seventies. I used my journalism background to become a writer for the Berkley Barb which is one of their very original counter culture alternative grass newspapers in the country.

**Sue:** You came to this area then in the late 1980's?

**Nick:** Yeah, mid 80's 1985.

**Sue:** And what brought you to Washington.

**Nick:** I had an opportunity to be a White House Correspondent which I did for a few years. And it was a great experience for me going into the White House virtually every day and attending briefings.

**Sue:** Which presidents were you?

**Nick:** Reagan and Bush number one.

**Sue:** Okay.

**Nick:** You know Larry Speeks was the press secretary for Reagan and then Marlin Fitzwater became the press secretary during the end of Reagan's term and then carried forward into Bush's, Bush Seniors term.

And in 1991 I was starting my own newspaper and that was something that a lot of people in the newspaper business sort of dream of doing. It's not really a very sexy job being a White House correspondent.

**Sue:** It sounds sexier than it is.

**Nick:** Yeah.

**Sue:** Now back up a little bit.

**Nick:** Go ahead.

**Sue:** When you first came to Washington though you were not a White House correspondent were you; weren't you also a political organizer at one point before you came to Washington?

**Nick:** I came to Washington to be a white House correspondent.

**Sue:** Okay great. And when you started the community paper why?

**Nick:** Why?

**Sue:** Why? What did you see lacking?

**Nick:** Well first of all I published my first newspaper when I was 7 years old. I've had the proverbial ink in the veins from a very young age and I have written about that some. My experience is also being editor of my high school and college papers, working for my local newspaper in my home town. And newspapering has been always a part of me. Not just writing but putting out newspapers. The Berkley Barb experience involved that too because they actually had to paste it and cut it and paste it and put it together.

**Sue:** Well we don't do that anymore.

**Nick:** We well we don't do it anymore but we did it when I started the Falls Church News Press yes we did.

**Sue:** That was 1991.

**Nick:** In 1991 when I moved to Falls Church one of the first things I noted was it had no newspaper and it was very difficult to find out what was going on in Falls Church and environs because as somebody who moved here to work in D.C. I didn't (are we working that – referring to recorder) know like many people I think you come and move into this area and go to work downtown every day; even what high schools were in Fairfax County in Falls Church. I mean you've got Falls Church High School, Woodson in Fairfax County, you've got George Mason High School which is the City of Fall Church's High School but it is located in Fairfax County. It is very confusing.

**Sue:** Yes.

**Nick:** And so you know one of the things I noted right away was that, and I did tell someone I think the first day we looked at moving here that oh this community doesn't have its own newspaper. I don't remember saying that but that's what I was told.

**Sue:** Now where did you grow up in California?

**Nick:** In southern California, Santa Barbara mostly.

**Sue:** Okay so

**Nick:** And I went to school in northern California.

**Sue:** Northern California okay.

**Nick:** So at any rate I made some friends and we had a number of conversations about what it would be like doing it and so I took a course on community television public access TV offered by a local cable access channel. It was the first class they had ever offered and I made some friends in there, um local residents including Bob Morrison who eventually became the treasurer of the city of Falls Church and a long history in Falls Church. And we talked about what would be involved with that and we produced a TV show on the eve of the local Falls Church elections Election night special. I broadcast the only way local citizens could find out who won the local election. And you know we interviewed the candidates and we interviewed other officials in the city you know – blah, blah, blah. And it was a big production we had kids from high school helping out doing outside polling and all this kind of stuff. And that got a nice write up eventually in the Fall Church's government newsletter that they send out every month. And I said well here's the opportunity to go ahead and start the paper and form a unique kind of alliance with what you might call the local chamber of commerce. I went to them to tell them what I was planning to do and seeking to inform them. The board of directors was so excited about having a newspaper that actually promoted business in the area by offering advertising and opportunities that they took a vote. And the vote led to officially endorse it.

**Sue:** Did they fund it?

**Nick:** No, not at all. What they did do though was there was one person on the board a banker at a local bank and made it possible for me to go to that bank and he helped me to get a modest line of credit started. And it's always been not a dime of anyone's money but my own that's gone into this and I'm not a rich man. And so there were no deep pockets involved whatsoever.

**Sue:** Okay. Well you have a reputation at least from the Wikipedia entry of thinking outside the box and maybe ruffling feathers a little bit over the years perhaps with the chamber of commerce and other things; but you also maintain your independence by not being funded by anyone else.

But how does that work with advertising because you are also the publisher, the founder, the reporter, there are some layers there that perhaps could get you know a little sticky. Do you use advertising from someone you don't like?

**Nick:** Well of course as long as it's not you know in poor taste or whatever. But no this goes to the whole point of the kind of creating a strategic alliance with the chamber of commerce. I got their mailing list; I send out a mailing to every member of the chamber saying if we started a local newspaper would you be interested in advertising – could you be interested in advertising? And I got a huge response from people because it was a vacuum. There was a void there was no place for local businesses to advertise.

And so I took a pile of post cards that were return address post cards to the bank as literally my collateral for that modest line of credit that we got to get started. And I maintained, true to my word that the newspaper would be a big would be able to promote business and ah not to just report what was going on in the community by virtue of the advertising that was provided yet we would be advancing the causes of the businesses in the community. I became the president of the Chamber in a couple of years won their pillar of the community award twice.

**Sue:** I've seen that.

**Nick:** Blah, blah, blah you know. And I felt that one of my biggest accomplishments in the first few years I was involved with the chamber – I was even though I had this kind of plans for the business community my personal what makes me tick as a person is my dedication to ah you know the next generation of people growing up, young people and to other people who don't have a voice.

**Sue:** Let's talk a little about that because so many places now don't have a community paper and younger journalist want to get their news in a different way perhaps not the hard paper copy but a website. When did you launch your website and was that something you did because you felt pushed to doing it that the circulation was?

**Nick:** Well just to finish what point I started to make

**Sue:** Okay

**Nick:** as president of the Chamber and the local newspaper I played a very instrumental part in forging a new mutual support between the business community in Falls Church and the schools. This is something where they had been – they were at each other's throats, so called, you know the chamber of commerce had this you know we don't want to fund the schools, we don't you know we want to keep taxes low.

**Sue:** Schools will suffer at that point.

**Nick:** Schools will hamper, yeah, but when I was on the chamber we actually won through no small effort a vote of the local chamber of commerce board to support full funding for the schools. And that was a sea change for Falls Church because it really put both interests on the same page saying business development is for the purpose of maintaining among other things our excellent schools. And the school system has to appreciate the role of the business community in the community and helping make that possible. Things that have led to a tremendous opening up of the ability of the community to develop. And for the school system to maintain its excellence and that's to this day I feel is my

greatest achievement in as the community as the role of the paper as a community paper in Falls Church.

As far as the web goes we've been there from the beginning and have a much more, we have a really outstanding site that's developed over time. But I still believe that when you, you know, open a web presence, the nature of the web is that the initiative that lies with the person in getting online to initiate access to your information and your news – the recipient of the news has to be proactive to get it. And that involves a whole bunch of thing like knowing where to go, knowing what you want in advance - whatever. Whereas when you produce a hard copy of a newspaper and it's delivered to every household, for example, in your distribution area it's dropped on your doorstep, you don't have to go out and get it.

**Sue:** Whether or not you choose to read it but it is there and convenient.

**Nick:** It is there and you are much more likely among other things to actually read through the whole thing and expose yourself to information and news and advertisers that you wouldn't do if you were just going on the web and looking for something that is very specific that you want to see – you miss so much.

**Sue:** So you reflected a bit on the role of the community paper, the business community and the strategic alliance. What is the role of a community paper in the Washington area where people maybe live in Falls Church but of course they work downtown for USAID and travel all the time or something. What niche thing are you providing that they can't get elsewhere?

**Nick:** That is the essential thing that you do provide is that which is not available any other way. And that is news of your local community you know, kids down the block you know the Eagle Scout award that was given out or you name it a myriad number of these things.

**Sue:** But very few such publications exist in our area anymore except for yours that do just what you are saying go down to that local level and have a family event like the eagle award in it.

**Nick:** Right, but that to me I remember when I was growing up my mom, it was that kind of a community newspaper where I grew up and my mom would clip everything out that had my name in it. Lots of times they were just lists of people who were going to some kind of an outing or something like that. Years and years later when she would write me a letter you know she would save those little yellowed news clips and just for fun she would throw one in there you know.

**Sue:** And you chuckled over them and

**Nick:** And I take great satisfaction in knowing that that's what's being done with the Falls Church News Press anymore – making scrapbooks and doing all that kind of stuff.

**Sue:** So it's a good place, it's providing things for people to have a family a sense of community and all the layers of their lives have come together and make sense.

**Nick:** It creates a sense of community it really is a bonding agent for what people identify as their community or something of that nature. Now, it doesn't do just that as is indicated by what I was talking about with this alliance with – it guides the community. I think that my editorial plus the way I fashion the news, the headlines and everything else serves to guide a community. And ultimately whether anybody is going to follow you – whether you want to guide – you want to lead – whether anybody follows has a lot to do with how people perceive where you are taking

**Sue:** Do people perceive the paper as liberal, Republican, conservative, independent, what labels do you think?

**Nick:** We're to the left of liberal, yeah.

**Sue:** You're to the left of liberal (chuckle, chuckle) okay.

**Nick:** But ironically enough and that's my, you know, since I have been running for the last 15 years a national affairs column every week that's what I am notorious for. On the other hand the newspaper has been pro you know in the local community.



The City has been pro development, pro-business and pro schools you know and in a certain sense pro good government. I mean so I think that that to me has been viewed as our detractors in the local community as the big bad pro development institution in town.

**Sue:** The detractors in the local community?

**Nick:** Who don't want development, who want to keep things you know the way they have always been you know don't want a new mixed use project going in. I've tended to support those because on – again on the grounds that this is what generates the revenue that's going to be able to keep this Falls Church as one of the finest School systems in the country.

**Sue:** Has Falls Church itself grown from what you consider a rural back water then to what it is now?

**Nick:** Very much so yeah.

**Sue:** Competing on a local national

**Nick:** Well there's been a you know we just opened up a new – a new establishment has been opened in Falls Church in the last few days. The Brew Pub the big one yes.

**Sue:** (chuckle)

**Nick:** And if you are going in there on the first couple of opening nights the place is packed and it's big. It's like the Capitol City Brewing Company in downtown D.C. has that ambiance inside unlike Falls Church.

**Sue:** What's the name of this one?

**Nick:** Matt Fox.

**Sue:** Okay.

**Nick:** You have to try it. Um, I think it's a game changer for Falls Church. Falls Church has since 2000 or so has about 5 large mixed use development projects

and new office buildings. And even being – some stuff has kind of ground to a standstill because of the recession but these things got developed. And but for these things as far as the physical viability of the City of Falls Church I don't know where we'd be by now without having not had those things. Mad Fox Brewpub sits right on top of what stood undeveloped as a parking lot, surface lot, for years.

When I first came to Falls Church, when I first started the paper and people forget, you know, if you sit there and at the Mad Fox Brewpub now you've got to look many plows are there, you've got a four story building across , you've got a six story condo with well ground floor retail. All around you it's all developed, well it was all nothing but a parking lot and before that a cow pasture for many, many years.

**Sue:** Have the demographics changed over the last 20 years?

**Nick:** Um, not as much as really I would have liked them to have changed in that regard.

**Sue:** But you would like them to have changed.

**Nick:** I don't know but I would like them to be more diverse. Many people in Falls church share the idea of wanting more diversity in the community – welcoming it and so forth – whereas just sections of the county have become ah, more ah you know racially, ethnically diverse.

**Sue:** But Falls Church?

**Nick:** You know it hasn't spilled out as much over into Falls Church. The interesting thing about Falls Church however is because the reputation of the schools the state department often steers people to Falls Church so some of our, you know, apartment complexes and so forth are filled with diplomats from other countries whose kids come from all over the world you know. But they tend to be extremely diverse at the high school.

**Sue:** At Marshall?

**Nick:** No, George Mason High School.

**Sue:** George Mason High School – right.

**Nick:** But they tend to be rather privileged because they are Foreign Service kids privileged and very intelligent, very diverse but in terms of the population itself you know we have big battles to get some affordable housing built in Falls Church. This is another thing that I have supported and um

**Sue:** So there isn't much now?

**Nick:** There isn't much affordable housing; we've just gotten a project approved you know after pulling teeth for years. You run into the nimbi you know not in my back yard phenomenon there as you do everywhere. But ah it's been one of the things we've been fighting for.

**Sue:** Okay, let me ask you a little bit about, before I do forget, this whole Wikipedia thing. Um and also there was a story last year I guess a Georgetown student geography student

**Nick:** Yes.

**Sue:** You had read that – this person said I've always been a little outside the box with my work but you were also always clean and fair. You don't fight dirty; but you do ruffle feathers.

**Nick:** Right.

**Sue:** Okay, so in light of those things tell me like five adjectives or nouns you would describe yourself as.

**Nick:** Well I mean I will go with all that I'm always pretty much, you know, been outside the main stream since my seminary days; since I was influenced Martin Luther King's speeches and writings in the late sixties and dove into the antiwar movement, into the gay liberation movement and other social causes.

**Sue:** Well and the social political affiliation that you had at that time was with labor with the labor party.

**Nick:** Well it became that after a while and that's because it was a sort of not a

major political party and I was independent whatever you want to call it; socialist inspired and you know I've always, I've kind of had as much core value structure the notion that the objective conditions exist with the advent of technology and so forth to feed, cloth, house, educate and ensure the health of virtually every person on this planet. And how you get to that point and achieve that goal that is the question. But the fact that it is an achievable goal and a goal worth fighting for and attaining. This is sort of at the core of where I come from. And even in Falls Church if I can contribute to the kind of value structure for the young people coming thru the system as I have done now for over nineteen years. It amazes me we are just now producing the issue number 1,000 of the Falls Church News Press.

**Sue:** Oh.

**Nick:** And that there is an entire generation of kids who are going off to school, going off to college this fall who never knew that there wasn't a Falls Church News Press. From their birth, the birth notice of one student, one child in the very first edition of the Falls Church News Press March 1991; and that young person now is heading off to college. So I kind of take that as sort of – I've had this entire generation of young people to help to impart the kind of values that will you know ideally, I mean, make them contributors to eventually seeing to it that everybody on this planet has the benefits of what is possible for them.

And so we do have a lot of – I don't take credit for it but you do have a lot of people, kids in Falls Church that go to college and then go into the Peace Corps and go into various and I can't take credit for, maybe I don't take credit for causing them to make those decisions

**Sue:** But you have

**Nick:** but I certainly reinforce those decisions, those types of decisions.

**Sue:** Have you mentored?

**Nick:** We hire a lot of kids from the local schools as interns and as employees, I give out an annual scholarship at the local high school based on an essay that I ask the students to write on a career of franchizing the disenfranchised you tell me, you know. And I've also initiated through my own initiative and financial support, a program that is in the Falls Church school system that is called Challenge Days which takes the entire class. They take and they decided to do the entire junior class each year and put them through a day long program that this group that does these Challenge Days from the Bay area comes in and conducts. Which is designed to break down the barriers that comes in and conducts was designed to break down the barrier sand differences and such so that people can get beyond their prejudices.

**Sue:** Stereotypes.

**Nick:** Yes and a lot of it's an emotional issue and experience for these kids and they come away from it – we've gotten so many

**Sue:** These are sixteen-year olds roughly?

**Nick:** Yeah, and they actually arranged to have it tried in a middle school for the first time and parents were telling me that these younger kids tend to be a little nastier to each other.

**Sue:** What kind of thing is done that day? What kind of challenge? Give me an activity an example of what is done.

**Nick:** Um, you know they take the students and put them across from each other and ask them you know to each speak to the person across from them and tell them something about themselves that probably the other student doesn't know. Things of that nature so it kind of peels away, they do some warm up exercises and I have to say that people have – are hugging each other and crying when they

come out and have this euphoria around it and then you get the cynical types who say well you know it wears off in a couple of weeks and everybody is back to being their usual nasty selves after that. I have to say I don't think that's the case. I don't think that's true I think that I took a careful note of the first graduating class at George Mason that had gone through that program and attended their high school graduation ceremony which I do every year anyway to take pictures and to cover it for the paper. But the speeches that were given by the students at that ceremony were really moving and they were moving in a compassionate type of feelings of compassion.

**Sue:** So you feel that something like that helped?

**Nick:** Themes of compassion yes, and I felt again it just reinforces the tendency of these students to want to think that way as young idealistic kids with a future ahead of them. To reinforce that component in them I think is a useful exercise.

**Sue:** Well you are an idealist; you would describe yourself as that?

**Nick:** No, I don't like idealism I believe in realism.

**Sue:** Can you name any real words or nouns when I said

**Nick:** No but I'm a game changer for the good and that doesn't mean sitting in and ivory tower and having ideals. It means getting out there and trying to accomplish things.

**Sue:** Now for the Falls Church paper you are the main reporter but you also have other reporters. Do you when you hire these people talk to them about their values so do you have to make sure you work with someone who feels like you do.

**Nick:** All I really ever do is – well of course for many years I was about the only employee at the paper. Have a couple of very helpful people who helped me

along with advertising and other things but the main thing I am interested in is if somebody comes to apply for a job is if they are familiar with the paper; and have read the paper, do they know the kind of ergo you kind of know where we are coming from. I have a weekly column in there and have for the last seven or eight years on – called anything but straight – lesbian gay issues.

**Sue:** Un huh.

**Nick:** So if somebody is offended by that they are gonna not want to work there. You know it's a sort of a self selection process. As long as you know me and I know you I'm totally what do they say determined government transparency cause you can read it in my paper every week. And it's all laid right out there and if you are happy you want to be part of that then please apply.

**Sue:** You do have reporters who young reporters who say I want to cover local government, I want to cover features on entertainment or something. But what do they tell you they want to do?

**Nick:** Well you know, they want to, you know they obviously want to gain experience as a writer; normally they no really have an area that they particularly want to focus on. I look for ones who are interested in hard news and flexibility and don't just want to write sports for example. But what they get when they work there is the total experience of putting out a newspaper. It's a very small operation and they're in that office and they are surrounded by every aspect from answering the phones and dealing with what comes in through the front door to the advertising people you know talking to each other you know the page layout.

**Sue:** That's a very rare thing to be

**Nick:** Putting the whole thing together so when they are done with the experience at the News Press they know how a newspaper works.

**Sue:** Different from if you have an internship somewhere.

**Nick:** Yeah, if you're writing a story or whatever you know. My first job at a newspaper was to write the obituaries every day.

**Sue:** That was good

**Nick:** Yeah.

**Sue:** And on that note let's Segway on that note you are a young person however are you grooming someone to take over this paper for when you decide you don't want to do it anymore?

**Nick:** No, I can never decide I don't want to do it anymore.

**Sue:** That's a good attitude.

**Nick:** But no, I am very, I do have a managing editor his name is Jody Fellows; he started to work for me as a junior in high school back in the mid-nineties, went off to college and every time he would come back he would, for breaks in college he would, work there on a part time basis over the summer you know and Christmas holiday. And when he graduated I offered him a full time job and he took it and he's been there almost ten years now and it will be 10 years next year. And he's my managing editor.

**Sue:** How large is your staff?

**Nick:** We have seven full time people.

**Sue:** Oh, okay and one of the people I spoke to when I call is Natalie she's a reporter.

**Nick:** She's a reporter.

**Sue:** Okay, so what – since it's a small enough staff that people – does everybody cover everything do you have the old fashion traditional beats or subject areas – how does it work?



**Nick:** Well, it's a division of labor. We have you know, I mean Natalie is the only sort of person who's strictly a reporter

**Sue:** Okay.

**Nick:** besides myself. But I am also the editor. Ah, she also commandeers some of the interns to do their work. So in that sense she's a little bit of a supervisor as well as a reporter.

**Sue:** The fulltime staff of seven doesn't count the interns that you have?

**Nick:** No.

**Sue:** Okay.

**Nick:** We have three people in the advertising department. I have myself and Jody Fellows the managing editor and Natalie that's six and then we have our layout graphics person.

**Sue:** And the website?

**Nick:** The website – he manages the website between Jody and he and some Natalie. I mean the website's very user friendly from our end as far as posting stuff up there and keeping it up to date and constantly updating it. We're a weekly paper but we update news on the website every day.

**Sue:** I've seen that and you're out there reporting every day I think too.

**Nick:** If needs be yes, yes. I wind up in meetings that are much longer then I would like to be at lots of the time.

**Sue:** Ha ha, that's life.

**Nick:** Yeah.

**Sue:** Let me ask you um, in Providence District or in this area what would you like

to see change? And it can be transportation or the culture or something what?

**Nick:** Well I have to say I have liked the direction of change that I have seen in Falls Church and in eastern Fairfax County. I think diversity is a great thing. I think the ability to embrace new Americans for example Hispanic and Asian populations; to be welcoming to them and to develop an identity for eastern Fairfax County. I mean I kind of, I kind of have seen that politically speaking - eastern Fairfax County, Providence District and some of Mason and Dranesville have been and the City of Falls Church have been very, have been the swing areas in the state politically.

That just this one area here provided more in a statewide margin of victory for Senator Webb for example in 2008 for Governor Kaine when they were elected. It wasn't always this way and so that shift obviously helped with the election of president Obama. So I think that's been a very important thing because previously this area was represented by a Republican and you know now it's represented by a Democrat in the eleventh District and a Democrat in the eighth District. Who knows what's going to happen this fall but I don't see that changing.

And so I think that more progressive values, more embracing of diversity, obviously in the redevelopment of Merrifield, for example, Falls Church and Tysons areas to create more livable communities where there's more walkable, more pedestrian friendly, more multimodal all the things we talk about wanting to do to cut down on traffic and cut down on, you know, vehicle – use of vehicles with transit and other things. These are all good things and there's a lot of very brainy people around here I know about in this section of Fairfax I know the schools are in Fairfax County, Falls Church is excellent.

Falls Church I can say does have the highest percentage of college graduates in relation to its' population than any other jurisdiction in the Country. And the

second highest percentage with advanced degrees of any jurisdiction outside of Los Alamos, New Mexico which really is rocket science. So that holds for Fairfax by in large and I don't know the statistics but - so you have a lot of people who are capable of making very good decisions when it comes to land use planning and so on and so forth. Of course there's wrestling with Richmond, wrestling with fiscal realities and so on and so forth.

**Sue:** You enjoy this kind of conflict – am I right?

**Nick:** Well I mean yeah it's what it's all about. So as long as it's people oriented I'm pleased with what I've seen I'm very pleased with the Tyson's plan and because it is going to bring people together with their jobs and going to reduce pressure on transportation and there are lots of provisions in there for cultural facilities and parks and open space and all the things that make it a livable place then and a happy place to grow up in.

**Sue:** Yeah that word happy.

**Nick:** Happy. It's going to be my happy place.

**Sue:** Well on that note we are done. Thank You.